

Hunting The Smaller AFRICAN ANTELOPES

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

photos by author

Africa: Land of the Big Five! The sleekness of a slinking leopard; the midnight thunder of a lion; the terrifying trumpet of an enraged tusker or the irresistible power of a charging buffalo or rhino. Classic safari sensations to be sure, but hardly the backbone of an African hunting trip.

African game is doing well in most of its ranges, particularly the 90-odd species of antelope. It is this group of game animals that turn a safari into an adventure of hunting diversity. Any general African shooting trip is built around the deer-sized antelopes and gazelles that live in almost unparalleled profusion from the southern Sahara to the Cape of Good Hope.

African antelopes vary widely in habits and physical appearance. As a group, they range from the toy fox terrier-sized dik-dik to the full ton weight of the bull Lord Derby or Giant Eland combining many types of horn design and conformation. The term gazelle is sometimes misused—it denoting those antelopes that have a facial gland below the eye as well as other lesser physical differences from antelopes on the whole. All gazelles are antelopes, but the reverse is not true. Antelope do not shed their horns. They are permanently formed over a porous, bony core growing from the skull.

Volumes have been written about the larger, more glamorous species such as the greater kudu, sable, bongo and gemsbeck, yet relatively little has been done on the more common species which are the real

backbone of most safaris. In terms of rifles and hunting techniques, it would be the greatest mistake to overgeneralize. The shooting conditions of the arid, open plains of east Africa are completely different than those in central or southern Africa. A 6mm rifle with medium or light bullets might be fine for Kenya when hunting the smaller antelopes where long shots without intervening brush are common; much heavier calibers would be required in the thick bush of Rhodesia or Botswana.

One hard rule applies to all the antelope clan: they are immensely difficult to kill if the first bullet is not perfectly placed. Many American hunters, accustomed to deer, elk, sheep and goats, have returned from safaris shaking their heads in disbelief at the bullet resistance of even small antelope. I have heard the opinion expressed that African game may be harder to kill than American game of the same size for the same reason that salt water fish generally fight harder and are more active than fresh water fish. In Africa, where there is a much higher ratio of predators to prey than in North America, it seems logical to conclude that each species of prey animal is constantly toughening and improving genetically. As only the most fit survive, the survivors are much more durable than they might be if native to an environment less challenging and hostile.

The impala, probably the most ubiquitous of the antelopes, is also one of the most beautiful. I once heard a safari client remark that if

only they were rare, they would be the most prized of trophies. A mature ram weighs 150 to 175 pounds and has very large and singularly handsome lyre-shaped or brandy-snifter horns, heavily knurled at the bases and looping upward and out to smooth, sharp points. There are two basic races of impala, the northern and southern. Although nearly identical in body size, the northern or east African type has much longer horns than does the animal found in central and south Africa. The record east African impala had $36\frac{1}{2}$ inch horns. A shootable ram from Zambia or Rhodesia would take anything over 18 inches; a very fine male would reach 21 inches.

Impala Inhabits the Light Woodlands

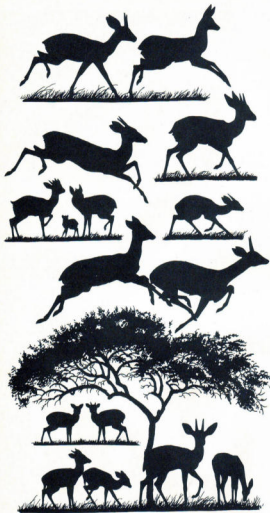
The impala is often included in that shadow hunters' category known as plains game. The term is generally meant to differentiate between common, harmless antelopes and the larger herbivores and predators rather than to describe habitat. Actually, the impala is an animal of the light woodlands between open grass plains and heavy forest. It is normally found in large breeding harems dominated by a single male or in bachelor herds of immature and non-dominant males. The wide distribution of the impala is due to its ability to both browse and graze on a large number of plant foods.

Collecting a good trophy impala is not an easy matter. Even in areas of light hunting pressure they are



Top Left: The dik-dik antelope is the smallest with an average weight of less than ten pounds. Top Right: Territorial breeding ram impalas defend their harems. Below: Author poses with his record Peter's Gazelle.





Assembling a collection of quality small bucks can be as challenging as big game hunting.

wary, keeping a good distance and, if possible, heavy cover between the hunter and themselves. Because of alertness and large herds, a stalk to shooting position without being spotted can be a great challenge in fairly open cover. Running shots are to be avoided. A trademark of a fleeing impala is a series of soaring bounds of as much as 40 feet in length and 12 feet in height, one of the most spectacular sights in Africa.

Impala may be taken with calibers as light as the .243 Winchester, although the light woodland conditions usually necessitate a heavier .30 type bullet as better insurance against bullet deflection or disruption of flight. Impala are hardy and wound resistant. They will travel amazing distances with terrible injuries as if unhurt, despite immense blood loss. Shoulder or lung shots are the best choices as neck shots tend to spoil the cape.

Although not as numerically common as the impala, the bushbuck family is even more widely distributed, existing in pairs or singly almost anywhere there is heavy cover near water south of the Sahara. Well named, the bushbucks are rarely seen in the open although they are highly territorialized and may be found close to the same spot day after day. In fact, if not severely disturbed, bushbuck will live for years in an area of a few acres of heavy cover. There are more than 40 species of bushbuck. They are the smallest of the spiral-horned antelopes which include the eland, bongo, sitatunga, nyala and greater and lesser kudu. Some adult males of the smaller races weigh 75-80 pounds; others may exceed this by 100 pounds. All are exotic looking, delicately hooved and often boldly spotted and marked, camouflaging them well in their shadow-dappled haunts.

Because of the cover they inhabit, bushbuck are usually shot at close range and open-sighted rifles are the best choice for fast handling. I have collected quite a few for the pot over the years with both the Ruger .44 Magnum carbine and with buckshot. In my opinion, the bushbuck is the most attractive of the small buck trophies, as

peculiarly African as the giraffe and a great thrill to outwit on his home field.

A wounded bushbuck, despite his unimpressive size, may be very dangerous when followed by a hunter. When hunting professionally in Zambia in the '60s, there was the case of a poacher who had snared a male bushbuck and moved in to kill it with the tomahawk most natives carried. The bushbuck charged him with enough determination to break the already worn wire snare and gore him square in the midsection causing fatal hemorrhaging.

Bushbuck are Tough to Kill

In roughly the same area of the Luangwa Valley a client of mine wounded a very good bushbuck one morning. I had recently hired a tracker named Kwiza, a tall Senga tribesman, who was obviously anxious to impress me with his skills. My shouting at him did not stop him from disappearing into the bush, chasing the wounded bushbuck with his throwing spear. After a few minutes, we heard him shouting several hundred yards away and ran as hard as we could to the spot. When we got there, Kwiza was treed by the spunky little buck which paced below as resolutely as any lion. The tracker's spear was sticking in the earth a few feet away where he had missed with his throw. I could see that Kwiza was beginning to notice that in his haste he had chosen a thorn tree as his perch. I was able to drop the bushbuck, but the embarrassment of having to climb back down among his peers, who were rolling on the ground destroyed by laughter, was too much for poor Kwiza who came to me that night and resigned.

The length of bushbuck horns vary with the species; only males are horned. The best common bushbuck recorded is almost 22 inches. Anything over a foot is shootable; a fine trophy if over 13 1/2 inches. Bushbuck make very handsome mounts, especially in pairs of males as they are often arranged. They are also one of the most delicious antelopes to eat.

Although limited in range to east and northeast Africa, the group of

antelopes typified by the Grant's Gazelle and his close cousins, the Peter's and Roberts' Gazelles, are among the most sought-after African trophies. The Peter's Gazelle is very close to the Grant's in appearance. The Roberts', for all practicality, is a Grant's with a genetic propensity for an outward flaring of the long horns. All these animals have excellent horn size in comparison to body weight. Average male specimens have measurements in the mid-20-inch range and fine trophies reach 30 inches with a body weight of 150-175 lbs.

Grant's Gazelles are one of the most flexible game species of Africa. They don't need free water, existing upon what moisture they get in their forage. In fact, in the oven-like Lake Rudolph area of Kenya they share their range almost exclusively with camels. They are herd animals much as the impala but will occupy more open terrain. Older rams, which are sometimes solitary, are quite wary and open shooting conditions indicate the need of a flat-shooting rifle of 7mm or larger with a good scope, although I have stalked them in grass close enough to spear.

Grant's and associates are very liberal in terms of the other species they will feed and associate with. Among the most difficult circumstances under which to collect a good trophy is when they are in company with kongoni—Coke's Hartebeest. Kongoni usually place a sentinel on a termite hill or other vantage point and their keen eyesight makes approach to shooting range in plains country tricky indeed. One of my best trophies was a Peter's Gazelle in the company of a hartebeest that was taken over 300 yards with a 30-06 in Sidamo Province of southern Ethiopia in 1968. It taped 28 1/4 inches, at that time the number one world's record according to Rowland Ward's.

Another widely distributed antelope is the reedbuck, found in a variety of forms from southern to east Africa as well as along areas of the west coast. Reedbuck are family-oriented and are normally encountered in pairs only in dense grass or reeds near water. Varying from a grayish color to a rich

brownish-red, they are one of the most interesting of the smaller buck to hunt. A reedbuck ram weighs about 75 pounds depending upon species, and has forward-curving, knurled-base horns to the Sudanese world record of 16-3/4 inches. Anything over 10 or 12 inches, however, is shootable in most of its range.

I have probably gotten more frights during my African hunting career from reedbuck than any other animal. When lion hunting in very dense cover or grass, reedbuck will often permit you to approach until they are literally underfoot, then erupt in a lion-colored blur guaranteed to stop your heart. As a rule, reedbuck will lie in cover during the daytime, feeding in early morning or evening and at night. Their alarm call, given when disturbed, is a sharp, eerie whistle. They will bound madly away for as far as 100 yards, then drop low and freeze, swallowed up by cover. Sometimes, reedbuck will break cover without seeing you, fleeing your sound. One knocked me down that way in Rhodesia.

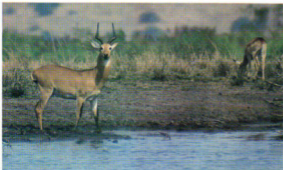
Reedbuck Have Less Vitality

Reedbuck don't seem to have the vitality of some of the other antelopes of even lesser size, and any mid-caliber rifle is adequate provided bullet construction is heavy enough to permit penetration through stiff grass without disruption.

The kob family has two members, the Uganda kob of east Africa and the central African puku or Senga kob. They are attractive animals that give the impression of a mixture between a reedbuck and an impala, chunkier than either with a horn conformation somewhat resembling that of the impala, but thicker and shorter. With an adult male weight of over 200 pounds, perhaps they do not legitimately qualify as small buck but they are a frequent trophy, especially in central Africa.

A very good Senga kob is over 18 inches. The largest my clients have taken was 19 1/2 inches. They are usually in small family groups or pods of three to six bachelors.

I was hunting with an elderly Italian physician in Zambia. He had shot a puku at 200 yards hitting it



high over the spine. The bullet just missed the backbone, stunning the animal and dropping it. As we started toward it, it jumped up and raced off. I headed around the side of a small hill in an effort to cut it off and kill it. A professional hunter may fire either in self defense or to prevent the escape of a wounded animal. As I gained elevation, I saw the puku walking slowly along, completely in the open. I nestled up to a convenient termite heap to rest my rifle. At 100 yards, the puku stopped and, standing broadside, looked in my direction. I centered crosshairs on his shoulder and squeezed off a shot. I was amazed to see a piece of turf blow from the ground beyond the animal, although it did not move or even wince. Thinking I must have somehow banged the scope off zero, I

Top: Grant's Gazelle is one of the most flexible antelope and can be found in a variety of environments. Center: The Uganda Kob has an incredible bullet impact resistance. Bottom: The Tommy or Thompson's Gazelle is the most common of the Kenya/Tanzania species. Right: Bushbuck are tough to kill but they make a fine trophy and are delicious to eat.



switched to iron sights and fired again. The same thing happened; no reaction at all. Three more rounds brought the same result. As I began to reload in baffled exasperation, the puku suddenly swayed, collapsed and died. When I got up to him, I found that all five of my bullets could have been covered by a demitasse saucer and were in the center

of his shoulder. Both shoulders were smashed and there was extensive meat destruction on the far side. Yet none of my shots had been enough to knock him down although he clearly wasn't going anywhere. For a deer-sized animal, this must be considered incredible bullet impact resistance. The muscularity of the kob is probably responsible for their remarkable toughness.

Both east and south Africa have species of antelope that, even though only remotely related, are similar in many ways. The Thompson's Gazelle or Tommy is the most common of the Kenya/Tanzania species and is found in large herds mixed with other antelopes in scrub and grass. At 55 to 60 pounds for a large ram, their ranking as the most common prey animal for almost every predator is balanced by their high reproductive rate, breeding and calving twice a year. Tommy horns are short and slightly curved—delicate rather than spectacular in comparison with Grant's or impala. On an east African safari, you will probably have Tommy for camp meat more than any other species.

The equivalent of the Thompson's Gazelle in southern Africa is the Springbuck, which at a glance closely resembles its counterpart. They are about the same size and have similar markings although horn shape is different, somewhat longer and hooked to the inside in the springbuck. A unique feature of this national emblem of the Republic of South Africa is the trough in the skin of the back in which nests a fan of stiff, white hairs used for signalling danger in the manner of the American pronghorn or whitetail deer. Both springbuck and Tommies are great jumpers and very active animals.

A Range of Small Bucks

At one time, the springbuck were overly abundant in South Africa and were heavily shot to keep down crop damage. This is no longer so but there is still a fair number of them. In open conditions perhaps 6mm rifles with scopes are the best for either the springbuck or Tommies, especially if a heavily jacketed bullet is used to keep down excessive meat damage or over-kill.

For hunting purposes, and despite the horror it may cause zoologists, I think it valid to lump the duikers, steinbuck, dik-diks, klipspringers and oribi into the simple category of very small bucks. The dik-diks are the tiniest at an average weight of less than ten pounds and consist of many sub-species throughout much of arid Africa. Traditionally, they are seen in pairs in fairly heavy bush and are preyed upon by everything that eats meat including eagles. They are fair game for the .22 WRM or the 5mm Remington although I must admit to never having killed one. I have raised several and have a soft spot for them. Besides, beyond the curiosity value they aren't much of a trophy.

The duikers come in a fascinating variety of models and are roughly divided into two main types: the bush duikers which have straight back legs and vertical horns, and the forest duikers which have rearward-slanting horns and oddly short front legs that give them a strange, tilted appearance. The bush duikers are undoubtedly built the way they are to enable them to disappear headlong into the heaviest brush with the least resistance. In fact, the word duiker is Afrikaans for diver. Some are spectacular, such as the tropical yellow-back race, and in most species adult male weight is in the area of 30-40 pounds with horns averaging a bit over three inches. Like most forest-dwelling small buck they are not herd animals but live in closely defined social territories marked by large accumulations of dung pellets in particular spots that act as warning signs to other trespassing duikers.

The steinbuck is one of the more common small antelope in south and central Africa. Not as heavily built as the duikers, it has conical, upright horns like reversed tent pegs in miniature. Often found in pairs, they are frequently at termite hills built around certain types of Acacia trees. I have seen them take refuge in holes in these mounds. The relationship, of course, is not with the termites but with the tree. The steinbuck eats the seed pods. Steinbuck are normally in medium or light forest but rarely are seen near the more open plains. They make a fine smaller mount and horns

average four to five inches with a male body weight of probably 25 pounds. Both duiker and steinbuck are often encountered when hunting bushbuck. The same arms recommended for bushbuck are appropriate for either species.

The oribi, which resembles the steinbuck, is found in Ethiopia all the way south to the Cape. It is a delicate, grassland animal found in small semi-herds or groups of up to six. The oribi is taller than the steinbuck and has straight, conical horns that measure an average of six inches. The oribi is generally at good population levels although it is protected in some areas such as parts of Zambia.

The most challenging small buck is the klipspringer, which might be considered an African version of a mini-chamois. It is perfectly built for precarious rocky or mountain terrain where family groups bounce shyly about as if they had glue on their hooves. Their powerful legs permit amazing jumps although I have seen them fall twice, neither time seriously. The klipspringer are protected by a heavy coat of shock-absorbing hair, once favored for saddle-stuffing, that gives the hunter the impression that it is a larger animal than it is. Horns average about four inches although the thin face and large ears of the klipspringer may make these appear longer. They are difficult to spot and harder to hit, freezing and blinding with their surroundings. I have shot several with the .22-250 with 55 gr. solid (non-expanding) bullets and find the long range results of this load excellent, if a bit light. Klipspringers make unusual trophies which are not easy to earn.

Assembling a collection of trophy-quality small bucks can be every bit as challenging as that of dangerous or large game. The assemblage of a complete grouping of duikers or bushbuck alone could take a man a lifetime. Many individual species not mentioned here are rare and coveted trophies, such as the Royal Antelope, pygmy antelope and others. Some have limited ranges, living in only a few square miles of forgotten, remote forest. Others are impossibly shy. The small buck prove beyond a doubt that variety is the spice of African hunting. ■